1.1. SETTING THE STAGE

Albemarle has undergone radical change since it was founded. Built on an old stage road that connected Charlotte and Raleigh, it was an important hub for regional commerce and trade. Rail service began with the Yadkin Railroad in 1891, then with the Winston Salem Railway in 1910. The Yadkin Railroad soon was abandoned, the first paved highway was built from Albemarle to Charlotte in 1923, and the automobile trend has continued since. Today, the railroad is no longer the primary means of transporting people and goods into and out of town; trucks and automobiles serve this purpose. Rising costs of living and a change in social norms create dual income households, which, in turn, position families' homes geographically between the employment areas. The pace of life has increased, free time has decreased, nutritional and exercise habits are slipping, and the public more commonly perceives pedestrian transportation as inferior, hazardous, or even dangerous. In fact, the words "dull" and "ordinary" appear in a thesaurus as synonyms for "pedestrian". All of these factors make transportation by foot very difficult for those who currently walk, those who would prefer to walk but cannot, and those who will need to walk in the future. But Albemarle is showing similar trends as other municipalities by rediscovering foot power. Part of the Yadkin Railroad is now a multi-use trail, and Albemarle is recognized as a National Main Street City by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Quick Facts on Walking

- Current land use patterns such as large-lot or strip development, lack of through streets or walkways, dead wall space, lack of crosswalks, long blocks, unappealing walks, wide and unshaded streets, wide streets with no medians and large shopping malls all inhibit walking. *(Local Government Commission. Why People Don't Walk and What City Planners Can Do About It (online at www.lgc.org - no date))*

- In neighborhoods with square city blocks, people walk up to three times more than in neighborhoods with cul-de-sac streets or other connectivity-reducing features. (*Rutherford, McCormack, and Wilkinson. Travel impacts of urban form: implications from an analysis of two Seattle area travel diaries. Presented at the TMIP Conference on Urban Design, Telecommunications and Travel Forecasting, 1996)*

- One-fourth of all trips are one mile or less, but three-fourths of these short trips are made by car. *(Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey. US Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, Research and Technical Support Center, 1997)*

- In 1969, approximately 50 percent of children walked or biked to school. Today, fewer than 15 percent of schoolchildren walk or bike to school. (The National Center for Safe Routes to School, 2007)

- A recent study of South Carolina schools found that children today were much less likely to walk to a school that had been built more recently. More than 20 percent of students that attended schools that were built during the 1960s walked to school. For schools built in the 1970s the share dropped below 15 percent, while for those built in the 1980s and 1990s it fell below 5 percent. (*Childhood Obesity Journal*, Volume 16, Number 1 Spring 2006)

- The majority of U.S. children do not walk or bike to school, approximately one third ride a school bus, and half are driven in a private vehicle. Less than one of their trips in seven is made by walking or biking. *(Center for Disease Control, 2002)*

- Urban Sprawl is linked to obesity. The denser the city's development, the less likely its citizens are to be overweight. *(University of Maryland's National Center for Smart Growth, no date)*

- 38% of all Americans feel that the availability of bikeways, walking paths, and sidewalks for getting to work, shopping and recreation is very important in choosing where to live. *(Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) October 2000 Omnibus Household Survey)*

- Trails and greenways have been shown to bolster property values and make adjacent properties easier to sell. A 1998 study of property values along the Mountain Bay Trail in Brown County, Wisconsin, shows that lots adjacent to the trail sold faster and for an average of nine percent more than similar property not located next to the trail. *(Recreation Trails, Crime, and Property Values: Brown County's Mountain-Bay Trail and the Proposed Fox River Trail, Brown County Planning Commission, Green Bay, July 6, 1998)*

- 57% of home buyers rank walking trails as their most desired amenity, ahead of ball parks and outdoor pools. *(National Home Builder Survey, 2004)*

- Multiple nationwide studies indicate parks, greenways, and trails increase the resale value of nearby properties by 5 to 20 percent. *(Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation web site, 2006)*

- A School of Public Health study showed that where more walking trails had been built, nearly 40% of people with access had used the trails and more than 55% of trail walkers had increased their amount of walking since they began using the trail. *(Public Walking Trails May Increase Community Fitness Levels, Center for the Advancement of Health, no date)*

- Studies show that a 5 to 10 mph reduction in traffic speeds can increase adjacent property values by roughly 20% (*Local Government Commission. The Economic Benefits of Walkable Communities (online at www.lgc.org - no date))*

- Around one-third of all Americans cannot or do not drive because they may be too young, too old, or unable to afford a car. *(2000 U.S. Census)*

- Widening roads actually worsens traffic congestion in cities. (*University of London Center for Transport Studies, 2000*)

- The average American directly spends almost 20% of their salary on transportation. This does not include the numerous extra shared public and commercial costs that occur because of an auto-dependent society. (*AAA, 2005 & Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2003*)

- 45% of people in August of 2005 spent less on other things to pay the increase in gas prices. (*ABC News Poll, 2005*)

- Regions with transportation choices such as walking and mass-transit are the most economically productive and competitive, while those that are limited to the automobile tend to have reduced regional economic development. (*World Bank, no date*)

- Traffic calming, mixed-use zoning and pedestrian projects can increase private investment substantially along previously automobile-dominated roads. (*Engineering News Record, 1998*)

The amount of facts that could be listed to support pedestrian improvements could go on indefinitely, but it is clear that a better pedestrian community creates a better community economically, aesthetically, socially, and health-wise. Current trends show that planning efforts to accommodate the automobile while ignoring the pedestrian has made our population less active than it ever was in history, and thus more prone to health problems. These trends need to be reversed.

Benefits of Walking

Transportation Benefits

Walking and bicycling can help to reduce roadway congestion. Walking and bicycling require less space per traveler than automobiles, and roadway improvements to accommodate pedestrians and bicycles can actually enhance safety for motorists. A 1995 Rodale Press survey found that Americans want the opportunity to walk or bike instead of drive and 40% of U.S. adults say they would commute by bike if safe facilities were available.

Health Benefits

The health benefits of regular physical activity include the reduced risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, and other chronic diseases; lower health care costs; and improved quality of life for people of all ages. Regular exercise gives senior adults a stronger heart, a positive mental outlook and an increased chance of remaining independent longer. In fact, walking for a minimum of 30 minutes each day or about 12 miles each week is required to retain a healthy body, but 60% of Americans lead completely sedentary lifestyles and 40% are clinically overweight *(1998 Report of the American Medical Association)*.

Environmental Benefits

Reductions in air pollution (emissions and tire wear), water pollution (surface runoff, oil production, and disposal), noise pollution, landfill materials, litter, urban sprawl, and wildlife habitat fragmentation will be a result of each person who chooses to walk instead of drive. Sixty percent of the pollution created by automobile emissions happens in the first few minutes of operation, meaning that shorter car trips are more polluting on a per-mile basis than longer trips.

Economic Benefits

Direct driving costs include gasoline, insurance, taxes and registration, maintenance, accidents, fines, parking, tolls, and depreciation. In fact, the American family spends about one-fifth of its income on transportation expenses, second only to housing. There are indirect costs of driving that society subsidizes with tax dollars, product pricing, salaries, and housing costs including

road infrastructure, environmental mitigation, parking, health costs, and work loss due to traffic, health, or maintenance issues. In addition, the recent gas price increases showed that when people spend more money on gas, they spend less money on other things. (An ABC News Poll found that 45% of people in August of 2005 spent less on other things to pay for gas, and the Charlotte Observer reported that vacationers for the Fourth of July weekend in 2006 still packed Myrtle Beach, but "spent tremendously less (money.)"

Walking could also stimulate the economy. Pedestrian-friendly shopping areas attract customers that would typically miss the vendors' storefront advertisements and are more convenient for passers-by on foot to "hop in" for a quick purchase. Shopping is also likely to become a social or a tourist attraction in pedestrian areas, which could enhance sales for storeowners. Property and home values also climb as the area becomes more pedestrian-accessible. Residents have confirmed time and time again through surveys and home purchases that they want to be able to live where they can safely walk. Higher home values increase the tax base for the community, which in turn provides more public services that increase the residents' quality of life.

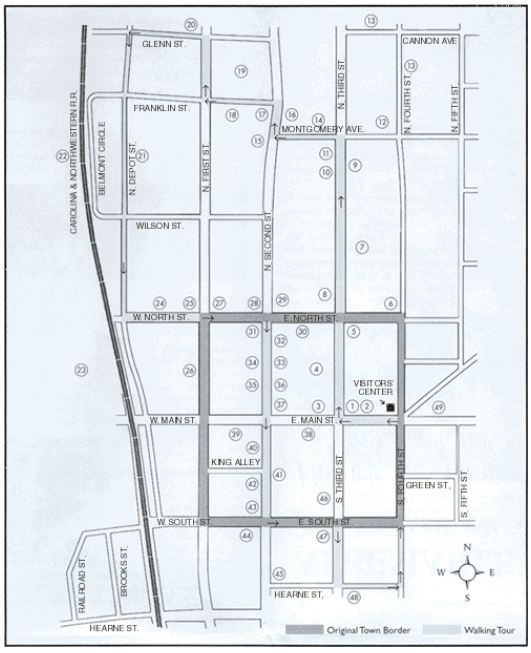
Quality of Life Benefits

Walking relieves stress, creates better health, saves money, provides outdoor recreational opportunities, creates learning opportunities for children, gives citizens the freedom of independence, and provides countless other benefits that make life better. In addition, the acts of removing vehicles from the roads or creating more areas where people are free to be away from automobiles make life less stressful. Several studies show that children who live near busy roads have higher blood pressure, faster heart beats, and higher levels of stress hormones due to the constant low level noise. (One source is a 2001 Cornell University study.)

1.2. PLANNING FOR PEDESTRIANS IN ALBEMARLE

Past Efforts

The City of Albemarle has been actively involved in several planning efforts containing elements related to pedestrian travel. The paved rail trail along the old Yadkin Railroad bed, the walking and jogging rail trail in Rock Creek Park, the signed running route through downtown, the restoration of the former Winston Salem Southbound Railway Depot into a farmer's market, and pedestrian safety features downtown have helped to keep the historical center of Albemarle pedestrian-friendly. In addition, the Albemarle Downtown Development Corporation distributes a map that shows a walking tour of the historic sites around downtown Albemarle. Future transportation plans will include findings from this pedestrian plan as a component of plans that encompasses all modes of transportation in Albemarle. Each of these plans will have a significant effect on the pedestrian environment in the area, and thus have a large effect on Albemarle's future.



Current Trends

This pedestrian plan represents Albemarle's first comprehensive study that focuses entirely on improving walking conditions. Southern cities are growing rapidly, and Albemarle recognizes that if it wants to retain its charm, character, and quality of life, walking must be integrated into the fabric of the community across the entire city. Pedestrian facility improvements must be made to realize the benefits of walking described earlier, and programs and policies must be in place to ensure that walking is a viable option for area residents in the years to come.

Local residents are becoming more actively involved in advocating for pedestrian and bicycle improvements, particularly with regard to safety concerns for walkers along busy streets in primarily residential areas. Residents of Albemarle understand that rapid growth is changing their town, and want to protect the safety of pedestrians as growth and development continue to occur. The citizens that have participated in this planning process have reacted favorably to the development of the Comprehensive Pedestrian Plan, and generally are excited about the prospects of improved conditions for walking. In time, the rising fuel prices will cause more citizens to demand alternatives to motor vehicles, and having a plan and the necessary infrastructure in place at that time will be a great value.

North Carolina Department of Transportation Bicycle and Pedestrian Planning Grant Initiative

In 2005, the City of Albemarle was awarded a $24,500 matching grant from the NCDOT Bicycle and Pedestrian Planning Grant Initiative to create a comprehensive pedestrian plan. This program encourages the development of comprehensive municipal bicycle and pedestrian plans. The Initiative stipulates that plans may be developed by consultants or by a combination of both municipal staff and consultants and a full time, permanent employee of the municipality must be assigned as project manager to oversee the plan development. URS Corporation and The Lawrence Group, using staff primarily based in Charlotte, was selected to develop the plan with Albemarle's Director of Parks and Recreation, Lindsey Dunevant acting as Project Manager for the City for the first half of the project followed by Public Works Director Michael E. Lambert for the second half. The requirements also call for a steering committee comprised of relevant local staff, regional planning staff, advocates and representatives of stakeholder groups to oversee development of the plan. Mary Meletiou, NCDOT's consultant for their Bicycle and Pedestrian Planning Grant Initiative with the Institute for Transportation Research and Education (ITRE) was actively involved with the process of this plan's completion.

Scope and Purpose of Plan

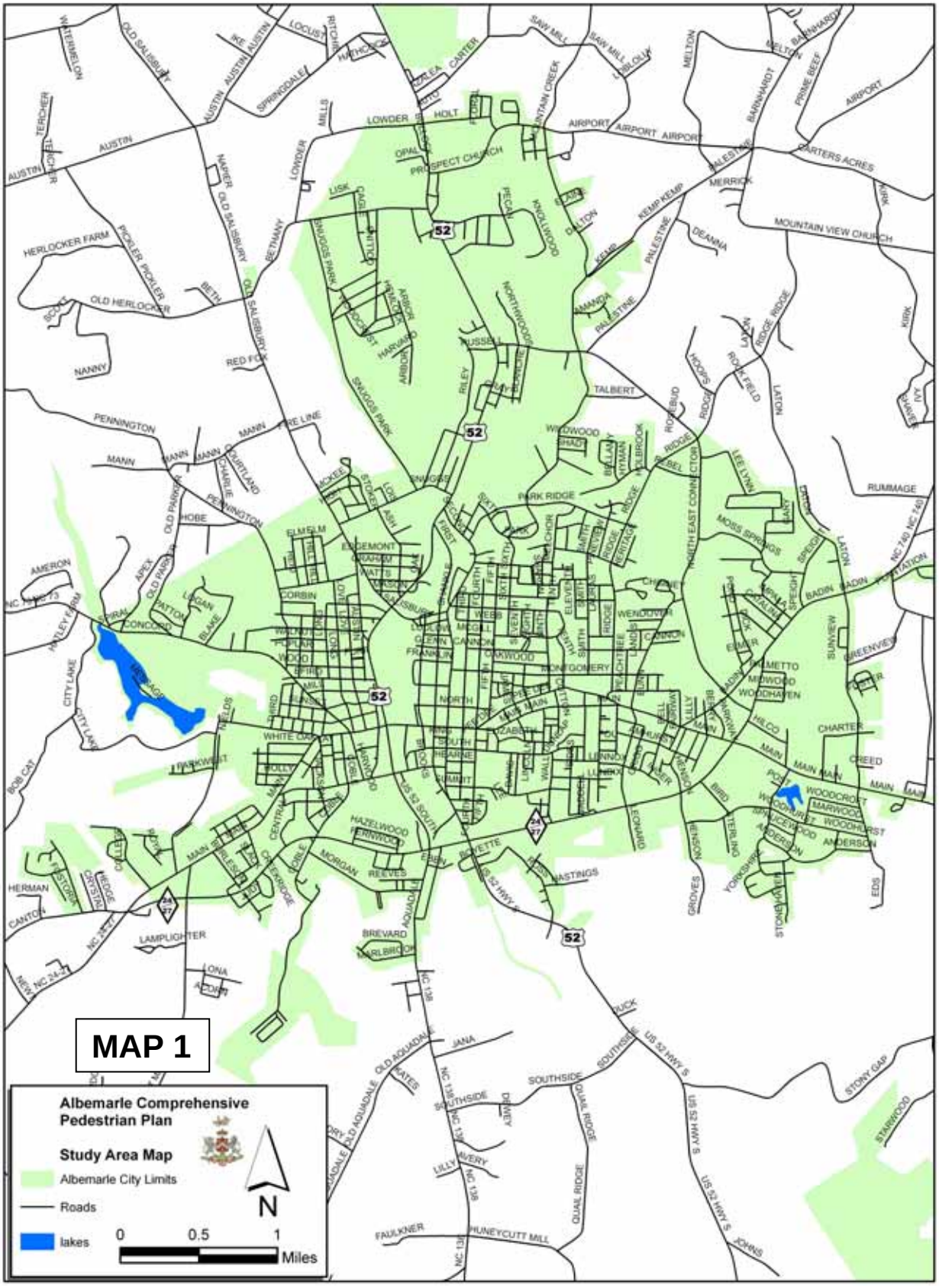
The scope of this pedestrian plan is to provide a comprehensive assessment, including identifying pedestrian needs and deficiencies, examining optional improvements, and prioritizing implementation strategies with viable funding sources. The Plan also examines existing conditions, identifies pedestrian route networks, conducts needs assessments, identifies design elements, and develops a strategic implementation plan.

The development of this plan was guided by a steering committee comprised of City staff and local stakeholders, including representatives of the following organizations:

- Albemarle Planning staff;
- Albemarle Police Department – School Resource Officer;
- Albemarle Parks and Recreation Department;
- Albemarle Public Works Department;
- Public Housing;
- Stanly County Health Department;
- Stanly County Family YMCA;
- North Carolina Department of Transportation; and
- Local citizens.

The Steering Committee met four times through the planning process to review interim material and offer guidance on study direction and efforts. As discussed later in this document, it is recommended that the Steering Committee or a similar appointed committee continue to be active after the conclusion of this study as an advisory committee to monitor implementation of the Plan and to advocate for additional pedestrian improvements.

The study area includes the City limits of Albemarle. A map of the study area is shown in **Map 1**.


MAP 1
Albemarle Comprehensive Pedestrian Plan
Study Area Map
Albemarle City Limits
Roads
lakes
0
0.5
1
Miles
N

1.3. GOALS OF PEDESTRIAN PLAN

To guide the development of the Plan itself, a series of goals was defined. Goals provide the framework for the entire study, and are needed to ensure that the Plan's recommendations address the true needs of the City. These goals illustrate the most important pedestrian principles to local stakeholders, based on input received from the Steering Committee, the mailed survey, and at the first public forum (discussed later in this report). The goals developed for this plan were also used as a basis for the project prioritization criteria (also described later in this report). Improvements that address these goals will make Albemarle a better community for pedestrians.

Defining the goals at the beginning of the project ensures that the recommendations are tailored to the needs of the City, and linking the project prioritization criteria to the goals provides a mechanism for ensuring that the most beneficial projects are ranked highly for implementation. The following seven goals were defined, based on stakeholder input:

1. Connect important destinations with sidewalks, greenways, and other pedestrian routes along roadways, utility lines, creeks, railroad lines or other potential corridors so that walking becomes a more viable transportation option.
2. Support and guide pedestrian-friendly land use decisions such as mixed-use zoning, connectivity, and infill that encourages a development style conducive to non-motorized transportation.
3. Improve safety and accessibility for pedestrians with a special concern for the disabled, elderly, children, and low income residents.
4. Improve environmental conditions and community health by reducing air, water and noise pollution resulting from unnecessary vehicular traffic and by increasing physical activity and exercise.
5. Encourage economic and social vitality by creating market, social interaction, and healthcare cost-saving opportunities.
6. Promote awareness through education of the wide-ranging benefits of a pedestrian lifestyle throughout the community.
7. Update and maintain existing pedestrian facilities with the necessary funding and workforce